

St. Cloud VA

# UPDATE

November 21, 2018



*A monthly newsletter for Veterans served by the St. Cloud VA Health Care System, and for those who serve them.  
Send news items and comments to St. Cloud VA Health Care System, Attn: Public Affairs Officer, 4801 Veterans  
Drive, St. Cloud, MN 56303, or via email to [barry.venable@va.gov](mailto:barry.venable@va.gov).*

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## **New publishing schedule**

We are changing the publication date of Update from the first of the month to the middle of the month. We are doing this to better serve Veterans organizations, many of whom relay the content in Update through their own communication efforts. Thanks for the feedback!

## **VA.gov website has a fresh new look.**

Secretary Robert Wilkie announced the new VA.gov website in a video address last Thursday as a precursor to Veteran's Day. The new website was designed to function as the VA's digital "front door" providing an enhanced customer experience backed by user data and Veteran feedback. This new website is a place where Veterans and their families can go to quickly and easily find what they're looking for. Highlights of the website include:

- A homepage inviting users to directly access the tasks they need most.
- Veterans can also now login for a more personalized experience with a

Veteran profile to view and manage personal information. They will also see a personalized homepage with everything they have in flight at VA, and recommendations for other benefits they may be eligible for.

To view the new webpage, visit <https://www.va.gov/>

## **Homeless Veteran Registry**

As part of [Heading Home: Minnesota's Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness](#), the State of Minnesota and its partners, including the St. Cloud VA have committed to end homelessness among Veterans.

The Minnesota Homeless Veteran Registry ensures that Veterans experiencing homelessness have access to appropriate housing and services. Anyone who served in the U.S. Armed Forces, Reserves, or National Guard can join the Registry, regardless of the type of discharge. If you are a Veteran and choose to join, a team of housing and service professionals will work together to help you access housing and services that meet your needs. Participation is voluntary. You do not have to join, and

choosing not to participate will not affect your eligibility for services.

Anyone who knows of a homeless Veteran is encouraged to call 1-888-LinkVet (546-5838). Veterans can choose to join directly and anyone can refer a Veteran to join by [completing the release of information form](#).

## **VA and Marijuana – What Veterans need to know**

Several states in the U.S. have approved the use of marijuana for medical and/or recreational use. Veterans should know that federal law classifies marijuana – including all derivative products - as a Schedule One controlled substance. This makes it illegal in the eyes of the federal government.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs is required to follow all federal laws including those regarding marijuana. As long as the Food and Drug Administration classifies marijuana as Schedule One VA health care providers may not recommend it or assist Veterans to obtain it.

Veteran participation in state marijuana programs does not affect eligibility for VA care and services. VA providers can and do discuss marijuana use with Veterans as part of comprehensive care planning, and adjust treatment plans as necessary.

Some things Veterans need to know about marijuana and the VA:

- Veterans will not be denied VA benefits because of marijuana use.
- Veterans are encouraged to discuss marijuana use with their VA providers.
- VA health care providers will record marijuana use in the Veteran's VA

medical record in order to have the information available in treatment planning. As with all clinical information, this is part of the confidential medical record and protected under patient privacy and confidentiality laws and regulations.

- VA clinicians may not recommend medical marijuana.
- VA clinicians may only prescribe medications that have been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for medical use. At present most products containing tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), cannabidiol (CBD), or other cannabinoids are not approved for this purpose.
- VA clinicians may not complete paperwork/forms required for Veteran patients to participate in state-approved marijuana programs.
- VA pharmacies may not fill prescriptions for medical marijuana.
- VA will not pay for medical marijuana prescriptions from any source.
- VA scientists may conduct research on marijuana benefits and risks, and potential for abuse, under regulatory approval.
- The use or possession of marijuana is prohibited at all VA medical centers, locations and grounds. When you are on VA grounds it is federal law that is in force, not the laws of the state.
- Veterans who are VA employees are subject to drug testing under the terms of employment.

## **The facts about VA nursing homes**

Over the last six months, VA's nursing home program has been the subject of much media scrutiny.

At VA, we welcome oversight because we know it makes us better, but this particular issue has been clouded by false statements, misinformation and hyperbole – doing a disservice to the Veterans and taxpayers VA is charged with serving.

That's why we wanted to take an opportunity to share the facts about the department's nursing home program.

### ***Are VA's nursing home ratings secret?***

No. VA posts its nursing home ratings online [here](#). Assertions that VA's nursing home ratings are secret are flat out false and highly irresponsible.

### ***How Do VA Nursing Homes Compare with the Private Sector?***

An objective look at VA's nursing home data shows that, overall, VA's nursing home system – composed of more than 130 Community Living Centers (CLCs) – compares closely with private sector nursing homes, even though the department on average cares for sicker and more complex patients in its nursing homes than do private facilities.

In fact, the overall star rating for VA's nursing homes compared to the 15,487 private sector nursing homes rated by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) shows that VA has a significantly lower percentage of one-star, or lowest

rated, facilities than the rest of the nation. VA's latest ratings show that only 11 – roughly 8 percent – of VA's nursing homes received a one-star rating overall.

### ***Why do VA Nursing Homes Tend to Score Lower on Quality?***

VA's overall nursing home ratings are based on three measures: site-visit surveys, staffing levels and quality. But the quality measure doesn't measure quality of care specifically. Rather, it includes a range of criteria, some of which are largely dependent on a patient's overall health, such as pain, prescription drug rates and daily living skills.

That's why VA CLCs – the vast majority of whose residents are at least 70 percent disabled – for good reason score lower on quality than do private facilities.

Specifically, VA CLCs serve a much higher proportion of residents with conditions such as prostate obstruction, spinal cord injury, mental illness, homelessness, PTSD, combat injury, terminal illness, and other conditions rarely seen in private nursing homes. Veterans also have many valid reasons, as a result of combat injuries and medical conditions, to express higher levels of pain (and for which opiates may not be effective or safe).

Also, private sector nursing homes admit patients selectively and, in some instances even evict difficult patients. Unlike the private sector – VA will not refuse service to any eligible Veteran, no matter how challenging the Veteran's conditions are to treat. In other words, VA CLCs homes often house residents with more complex medical needs that private sector facilities either

have not accepted, or have sent back to VA.

### ***VA Nursing Homes Provide More Direct Nursing Care***

Finally, VA CLCs have a higher staff-to-resident ratio than private sector facilities, meaning residents in VA facilities get more direct attention from nursing home staff than do residents in the private sector. That higher staffing level allows VA CLCs to have a higher proportion of residents under hospice, spinal cord injury, and serious mental illness care. But those same conditions can also make the quality metrics appear lower than the community.

VA is continuously striving to improve all of its health care facilities. The same holds true with our community living centers. Sites that are struggling with one or more dimensions of quality are receiving hands-on training and other assistance from VA subject matter experts. A requirement to demonstrate progress on Nursing Home Compare quality metrics and annual surveys has also been added to the performance plans of all VA facility senior executives, in order to ensure that all our CLCs get the managerial attention and resources they need.

When problems arise, we will address them head on and hold accountable those responsible.

### **Battlefield Acupuncture**

Starting Nov. 21, Veterans looking to use battlefield acupuncture to assist with chronic pain management can discuss obtaining a consult from their primary care provider at the St. Cloud VA HCS.

Once a consult is obtained, Veterans can use the battlefield acupuncture walk-in clinic. Hours and locations of the walk-in clinic will be specified in the consult. At the walk-in clinics, Veterans are seen on a first-come, first-served basis as time allows. Veterans eligible for beneficiary travel are reimbursed for one-way travel only for the walk-in clinic.

### ***What is Acupuncture?***

Developed in Asia thousands of years ago and has been used to treat many different health problems, including pain. Acupuncture uses sterile needles gently inserted into the skin and left for brief periods of time. Research has shown that acupuncture helps to reduce pain not only on the area where the needles are placed, but all over the body. Acupuncture helps the nervous system reduce pain signals and releases chemicals to reduce the feeling of pain. It has been proven a safe and effective way to treat pain over thousands of years.

### ***What is Battlefield Acupuncture?***

In Battlefield Acupuncture, the clinician places small sterile needles just in the ear. The entire body is represented in the ear and by placing small needles in the surface of the ear, you can affect the whole body.

### ***Who should avoid Battlefield Acupuncture?***

- People who are afraid of needles to the point of passing out
- People who have a bleeding disorder or are on certain medications
- Women who are pregnant (or think they may be)

### **What is the procedure like?**

- The clinician will place sterile needles at Battlefield Acupuncture points on the surface of your ears.
- You may have some mild discomfort where the needles are inserted.
- If the needles bother you, you can remove them.
- The needles are expected to fall out after two to four days. You can also remove them yourself if your clinician advises you to remove them.

Veterans are encouraged to discuss use of battlefield acupuncture with their primary care provider.

### **There is still time to get your flu shot**

VA has teamed up with Walgreens Pharmacies nationwide to allow all Veterans who are currently enrolled in the VA healthcare system to be able walk into any Walgreens to receive a vaccination *at no cost*.

The immunizations available at Walgreens under this program use quadrivalent flu vaccine: other formulation flu vaccines are not available using the VA Walgreens program.

Veterans wishing to receive the vaccination at Walgreens simply need to present a Veterans Health Identification Card and a photo ID, at any participating Walgreens to receive the vaccination.

In addition, after the Walgreens pharmacist administers the vaccine Walgreens will transmit that information securely to VA where it becomes part of the patient's electronic medical record.

Veterans getting vaccinated outside the VA or through Walgreens are asked to tell us about it at your next appointment.

VA is committed to keeping Veteran patients healthy, and vaccination is the best way to prevent the spread of flu. No matter where Veterans live, they can still visit Walgreens to get a free flu shot.

**VCS shopping available online.** [ShopVCS.com](https://shopvcs.com), an online shopping benefit to Veterans is now open.

Veterans enrolled in VA Healthcare may shop online at [ShopVCS.com](https://shopvcs.com). This new exclusive shopping experience offers deals on over 100,000 products from hundreds of top brands with the ability to easily and securely shop from any device. The new site will feature an expanded catalog of products ranging from: sportswear, jewelry, health and beauty, home goods, electronics, outdoor gear, travel options, event tickets, and much more.

Proceeds will directly support Veteran programs and services such as: National Rehabilitation Adaptive Sports Games, Vets Crisis Suicide Prevention, Fisher House, Women Veterans Programs, Disaster Relief, Homeless Veterans, and much more.

### **Nurses in Action**

In the Spring of 2018, the Chief Nursing Officers from CentraCare, St. Cloud VA and the Stearns County Public Health Director collaboratively formed the *Nurses in Action* consortium. The collaborative was created in an effort to activate nurses under the action area of "Making Health a Shared Value". It is intended to galvanize the community of nursing by educating them on specific topic areas, working with them

to identify gaps or needs in services and finally to set nurses in motion to lead action in the community to promote change. The first topic of focus was on the priority around suicide in Veterans, youth and young adults and farmers. All nurses working in the systems of the three partners as well as the local schools of nursing, the local parish nurses and Benton County public health nurses were invited to the event. The evening “sold out” in less than 2 weeks with a sizable waiting list of participants wanting to attend.

Considered a “disease of despair”, suicide, both nationally and in Minnesota (age-adjusted), is on the rise. According to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) almost 45,000 Americans die from suicide each year. The Minnesota Department of Health, Center for Health Statistics identified that in 2013 a “total of 683 Minnesotans died of suicide-making it the ninth leading cause of death.” That averages out to about 1 Minnesotan dying by suicide every 12 hours (AFSP). The Centers for Disease Prevention and Control reports that suicide is the second leading cause of death for youth ages 10-24 (2016) which is also highlighted by the 2015 Minnesota Student Survey data that indicates 8.6% of youth in grades 9-12 report they had made at least one suicide attempt in the past 12 months. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 18% of all suicides in the U.S. are veterans with over 65% of them over the age of 50. Finally, economic stress and isolation are dominant risk factors for farmers; impacting the rising numbers of thoughts of, attempts and deaths related to suicides in farmers.

October 29, 2018 was the inaugural event for the Nurses in Action collaborative. Four

speakers were engaged to lend their expertise to the topic area.

One hundred-twenty nurses (120) registered for the event with that many in attendance. The event started with three content experts addressing each of the populations impacted by suicide, outlining data to clarify the issue, activities that were being done or where gaps were noted and ending with resources. One speaker was a family member of a suicide completion, telling her story of the impact to her and her family, life and community to the community.

The final hour of the event was set aside for action planning. Time was dedicated to the activity asking the nurses at each table to address a specific population group and develop action plan items, which were reported out to the group, collected and summarized below.

### ***Future plans***

A summary of the action plan will be sent out to all participants with the encouragement to reach out to fellow nurses to begin implementing these action items in the community. The three partners will be reviewing the evaluation to determine what worked well and where improvement of future Nurses in Action Collaborative events can occur. Future activities will be planned, again, using the required community health assessments currently being conducted in the area as a guide for overriding issues or gaps that need to be addressed.

## **Nurses in Action Suicide Action Plan Summary**

### System changes

- More flexible hours/access
- Recognizing vets and ask the questions
- Personal connections that you have – build relationships
- Educate ourselves, educate young people, clinical staff need education on having the conversation. Keep this conversation going!
- Crisis numbers available in lobby and throughout VA
- Use of App that is available for help
- Get the message out that it is OK to not be OK
- Engaging churches –educating and coordinating times of year – farmers, personal stories
- Counselor part of the school system – they are there all the time – before time – part of the system

### Environmental changes

- Conversations and education for kids, parents and HC
- Bringing HC workers into young classrooms to talk regarding coping
- Contact information in bathrooms of schools/posted resources on social media
- Gun locks – more awareness of resources
- Community awareness regarding farmer stresses. Education to those who farmers trust.
- Literature to public areas such as coffee shops, fairs, diners, etc. “Directive” before crisis

- Kids: Identify three role models for crisis moments. Explain “end-is-the-end” and how suicide impacts family
- Billboards with resources/issue
- Develop Pamphlet on education
- Getting info to families about the issue

### Policy development

- Lethal means restrictions

## **UPCOMING EVENTS**

### **Outpatient Clinics Closed for Federal Holiday**

Thursday, Nov. 22

Outpatient clinics and administrative offices, including VA Clinics in Brainerd, Montevideo and Alexandria will be closed. Urgent Care at the St. Cloud VA will be open from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.

### **Health Care Enrollment Fair**

Tuesday, Nov. 27

Benson VFW Post 1403

1135 Pacific Avenue, Benson MN.

Military service is valuable to the nation, and in return VA health care enrollment can provide a lifetime of valuable benefits to eligible Veterans and their families.

Veterans living near Benson are invited to take advantage of this opportunity to apply for or learn more about VA health care benefits.

### **Effective Communication for Caregivers**

Thursday, Nov. 29 2:30-4 p.m.

St. Cloud VA, Bldg. 48, Rm. 204

Caregivers of Veterans are invited to attend a workshop designed to improve Caregiver communication skills with care partners,

loved ones, service providers, and medical professionals. Space is limited! Registration required. Contact: Jess Behrends, Caregiver Support Coordinator (320) 252-1670 ext. 7283 or Jessica.behrends@va.gov

#### **Veterans Affairs Radio Show**

Monday, Dec. 3                      8:10-8:30 a.m.  
KSNI AM 1450/FM 103.3

#### **Veterans Law Clinic (by appointment only)**

Tuesday, Dec. 4                      Noon-2 p.m.  
St. Cloud VA, Bldg. 28, Room 34  
Free legal consultation for Veterans for Social Security law, housing, consumer, child support, family law, employment and expungement. No criminal law issues will be discussed. Please call 320-253-0138 or 1-800-622-7773 to schedule an appointment.

#### **Health Care Enrollment Fair**

Tuesday, Dec. 4                      4-7 p.m.  
Ortonville Public Library  
421 2nd Street NW, Ortonville MN  
Military service is valuable to the nation, and in return VA health care enrollment can provide a lifetime of valuable benefits to eligible Veterans and their families. Veterans living near Ortonville are invited to take advantage of this opportunity to apply for or learn more about VA health care benefits.

#### **Mental Health Recovery Outreach Group**

Wednesday, Dec. 5                      5-6 p.m.  
Good Earth Co-Op  
2010 Veterans Drive, St. Cloud  
This informal group meeting provides an opportunity for Veterans to hear stories of hope and inspiration from fellow Veterans about their mental health recovery. VA staff will be present to answer questions and provide information about the comprehensive mental health treatment

programs at the St. Cloud VA. Open to Veterans and family members.

#### **Health Care Enrollment Fair**

Thursday, Dec. 6                      4-7 p.m.  
Redwood Falls Public Library  
509 S. Lincoln St., Redwood Falls MN  
Military service is valuable to the nation, and in return VA health care enrollment can provide a lifetime of valuable benefits to eligible Veterans and their families. Veterans living near Redwood Falls are invited to take advantage of this opportunity to apply for or learn more about VA health care benefits.

#### **Introduction to Whole Health**

Friday, Dec. 7                      Noon-2 p.m.  
St. Cloud VA, Bldg. 28, Room 67  
The St. Cloud VA is beginning a new approach to improving health and treating chronic pain by offering alternative and complementary therapies as part of a new Whole Health program.

#### **Health Care Enrollment Fair**

Thursday, Dec. 13                      4-7 p.m.  
Olivia Public Library  
405 S 10th Street, Olivia MN  
Military service is valuable to the nation, and in return VA health care enrollment can provide a lifetime of valuable benefits to eligible Veterans and their families. Veterans living near Olivia are invited to take advantage of this opportunity to apply for or learn more about VA health care benefits.

#### **Coffee Talk**

Friday, Dec. 14                      2-3:30 p.m.  
St. Cloud VA, Bldg. 4, Rm. 114  
Learn how to most effectively use VA systems of care. If you can't come in person, dial-in via telephone at: 800-767-



1750, participant code 11242#. All Veterans are welcome.

### **Introduction to Whole Health**

Monday, Dec. 17 10 a.m.-Noon

St. Cloud VA, Bldg. 4, Room 114

The St. Cloud VA is beginning a new approach to improving health and treating chronic pain by offering alternative and complementary therapies as part of a new Whole Health program.

### **Veterans Law Clinic (by appointment only)**

Tuesday, Dec. 18 Noon-2 p.m.

St. Cloud VA, Bldg. 28, Room 34

Free legal consultation for Veterans for Social Security law, housing, consumer,

child support, family law, employment and expungement. No criminal law issues will be discussed. Please call 320-253-0138 or 1-800-622-7773 to schedule an appointment.

### **Voices for Veterans Radio Show**

Wednesday, Dec. 19 8:10-8:30 a.m.  
WJON AM 1240

### **Outpatient Clinics Closed for Federal Holiday**

Tuesday, Dec. 25

Outpatient clinics and administrative offices, including VA Clinics in Brainerd, Montevideo and Alexandria will be closed. Urgent Care at the St. Cloud VA will be open from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.

*For a complete Calendar of Events, go to <https://www.stcloud.va.gov/calendar.asp>*

### ***DID YOU KNOW:***

In 1953, an employee at C.A. Swanson & Sons overestimated demand for Thanksgiving turkey and the company was left with some 260 tons of extra frozen birds. As a solution, a Swanson salesman ordered 5,000 aluminum trays, devised a turkey meal and recruited an assembly line of workers to compile what would become the first TV tray dinners.

### **QUOTATION OF THE DAY**

"Store security stopped my wife at the door for trying to steal a butterball turkey. I had to show ID proving I'm not a butterball turkey."

- Just Bill

## Quick Reference Phone List

<b>Main St. Cloud VA HCS Phone Number</b>	<b>320-252-1670 or 800-247-1739</b>
TDD User	320-255-6450
<b>Max J. Beilke VA Clinic, Alexandria</b>	320-759-2640
<b>Brainerd VA Clinic</b>	218-855-1115
<b>Montevideo VA Clinic</b>	320-269-2222
<b>Veterans Crisis Line</b>	<b>800-273-8255 Press 1</b>
<b>Homeless Veteran Hotline</b>	877- 424-3838

### Billing:

• VA Care	866-347-2352
• Care in the Community (non-VA care)	877-881-7618
Chaplain Service	Ext. 6386
Community Care Referrals	Ext. 6401
Discrimination Complaints	Ext. 6304
Eligibility	Ext. 6340
Nutrition Clinic	Ext. 6376
Transition & Care Management Program	Ext. 6453
Patient Advocate	Ext. 6353
Pharmacy Refill Line	855-560-1724
Privacy Officer	Ext. 6408
Public Affairs Office	Ext. 6353
Release of Information (Medical Records)	Ext. 6336
Transportation	Ext. 7622
TRICARE	844-866-9378
Voluntary Service	Ext. 6365
VA Police	Ext. 6355

## Stay in Touch

Visit our Website: [www.stcloud.va.gov](http://www.stcloud.va.gov)

Like us on Facebook: [www.facebook.com/StCloudVAHCS](http://www.facebook.com/StCloudVAHCS)

Sign up for our automated email service. Visit the St. Cloud VA Website at: <http://www.stcloud.va.gov> and on the right-hand side of the page is a request to sign up for email updates. Enter your email address and you are automatically signed up to receive email updates from our web page. There are also options presented to sign up for updates from other government sites.